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ABSTRACT

This paper describes results of a questionnaire administered to over 700 students registered in lower-division Spanish courses in November 1973 at the University of Texas at Austin. The purpose of the questionnaire was to survey student attitudes and to move toward a means of evaluating beginning and intermediate level courses. On the basis of the questionnaire, the following general statements can be made: most students take Spanish because of the language requirement; most teachers are rated favorably; students seem to want accelerated courses for the better students and slower courses for the poorer students; students desire more courses for nonmajors; most students are interested in learning about the culture and people along with the language. A sample questionnaire is attached. (AM)

ED107125

Summary of Results of Student Evaluation Survey--Lower Division Spanish, Fall Semester, 1973

Carlos A. Solé

In November, 1973, a course evaluation and survey of student attitudes was administered in the Spanish Lower Division courses of the Department of Spanish and Portuguese. The survey, a lengthy one comprised of 102 items, was designed as a tentative step toward the production of an "instrument" for the evaluation of the success of beginning and intermediate level language courses in Spanish, and to begin to investigate ways of sampling student opinion for the purpose of improving the structure and content of these courses.

It may be asked why such a survey was thought to be needed since the University's Measurement and Evaluation Center provides one ready-made. There are several reasons for the need for a special questionnaire for foreign language courses: first, the teaching methods used in a foreign language course are quite different from those of other courses and questions on the MEC questionnaire are frequently irrelevant to foreign language courses. Yet we need to know--in hard, "cold" data, rather than by way of impressionistic reports--the effect of certain kinds of course content, course structure, teaching methods and teacher characteristics upon the value of language courses for our students in terms of their perception of their mastery of Spanish and the value of these courses in their total college education. With an eye toward both the present "crisis" in foreign language study in general and toward the value of the study of Spanish to the students enrolled in our courses, this evaluation was proposed and carried out.

Since beginning and partially completing the analysis of this survey, a shorter and, I believe, much improved and more relevant survey has been developed which could be used, if funds are available, to evaluate lower division courses on an on-going basis for several years to help suggest changes in courses, plan training for teaching assistants and to evaluate the results of such revisions.

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The sample

The summary of results of the survey which are described below were based on data collected from 733 (in some cases 786) students registered in lower division courses in November, 1973. One half of all sections taught in lower division were surveyed in order to obtain a large sample. No single instructor is represented more than once in this survey and a representative number of classes taught at each hour for each course are included in the sample. All students present on the day of the survey were required to take the survey. Thus we can be confident that neither students who are highly favorable to the study of Spanish nor those who are very negative in their attitudes are over-represented in this group. Teachers did not have the option of choosing which of their two sections (if they taught two) would be sampled. Naturally, most of the instructors represented in this sample are teaching assistants. However, a few faculty members are among the group of instructors whose sections were sampled.

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Who are the students?

It may come as a rather great shock to most of us to find out that 80% of our lower division students are enrolled in Spanish primarily to satisfy the language requirement. Only about 12% take Spanish as an elective. The remaining 8% are divided between Spanish majors and minors. More than one-half have taken high school Spanish and many continue with Spanish in college because it gives them some advantage in college. Almost one-half have had another language before enrolling in UT Spanish courses. (One percent have had no language at all. This figure is higher for 406 and 407.) The data shows that our high enrollment in lower division depends heavily on the University's language requirement: 40% claim that they would not have taken any foreign language at UT if it had not been required. If the "uncertain" group is added, the percentage of our "captive" audience rises to 53% of the entire sample. Of the requirement students (non-elective, non-major or minor) about 31% say they would probably have taken a foreign language if it had not been required.

Course drops

Unfortunately it was impossible because of lack of time and money to survey the students who dropped Spanish courses during the fall semester. However, among the students still registered, one out of five had dropped at least one Spanish course or another foreign language course at college level. Lack of time was cited as the cause of course drops by about one-half of these students, but one-third replied that difficulty in learning a foreign language was the most important reason. When freshmen were eliminated from the data (most of them could not have dropped a language at college level), it is clear that these students continue to have trouble in the foreign language classes. They find their Spanish classes more difficult, less enjoyable, more dull, requiring more preparation time, less valuable in terms of cultural content. They felt less successful in high school and are much less likely to take courses beyond the requirement. They also feel much more pressured by departmental exams, but they do not have a lower grade average than students who have not dropped a language course. They are also, understandably, less likely to have registered for a foreign language course if not required to do so. Preliminary analysis suggests that a student's prior interest in taking a foreign language is very important in how he perceives the value of his Spanish courses and also in the likelihood of his taking courses beyond the requirement. We do not seem to have been very successful in changing the attitudes of students who have difficulty in learning a foreign language, or, for that matter, in adjusting our courses to assist them in learning more successfully.

Spanish courses beyond the requirement?

Forty-nine percent of the students indicated that they did not plan to take any Spanish courses beyond the requirement. Twenty-two percent were undecided or did not answer the question. This left only 28% who said they did plan (definitely yes, or probably) to take more courses after finishing the requirement. Realistically, considering all the pressures on college students, we should not expect many of the undecided students to choose Spanish as an elective.

The students who did not plan to take more Spanish and those who were uncertain were asked to give the most important reason for their decision. Forty-nine percent of these 476 students stated that they were juniors or seniors and had no time left or that they had no electives left to use on Spanish courses. The other 51% replied that they were not interested in any of the courses offered, had poor grades in Spanish or just didn't like studying a foreign language (about an equal percentage of responses on each). These replies indicate several approaches to encouraging more students to continue past the requirement: an effort needs to be made to convince advisors in other departments to encourage their students to take their foreign language early in their college careers instead of waiting until they are juniors, when their high school preparation has been largely dissipated. More diversification of "low-level" upper division courses in the Spanish department should be considered, especially of a non-literary type, perhaps multi-disciplinary in nature. Cross listing courses for credit in other departments could help insure that classes attracted the necessary number of students. Growth in acquisition of Spanish rather than full upper-division level competence should be considered as a valid requisit in the courses. Finally for those students who have poor grades or don't like foreign language study, changes should be considered in the content and teaching methods in lower division courses which would make foreign language study less onerous for more students. For example, the inclusion of more cultural content in all lower division courses and the designation of several sections of 406 for students who recognize that they have difficulty in learning a foreign language. These sections could be taught by teaching assistants who volunteer for the assignment and could use the same materials as normal sections, but begin with a slower pace, emphasize aural comprehension and use special techniques to help those students to overcome what is commonly called The Mental Block.

Why do students choose Spanish?

Nearly half of the sample stated that they took Spanish at UT because they had had it in high school. Presumably many of them felt it was to their advantage to continue in a language which they already knew to some degree. Many of these students received placement. However, 62% receive only one semester of advanced placement, a rather poor record for the value of high school Spanish instruction. Most of the remaining students (37%) chose Spanish because they felt of all the foreign languages offered (or which they considered), Spanish was the one which had the most opportunities for use. Very few chose Spanish because it is the language spoken by family or friends (7%) and even fewer (6%) because it "fits in well" with their academic program. (This is an indication, it seems to me, of the isolation of foreign language study from other fields where it would be relevant--sociology, history, comparative literature, minority studies, social work, etc.) A few (3%) admitted that they had heard that Spanish was the easiest of the popular modern languages.

What benefits do students expect to get from a minimum of two years of study of Spanish as a foreign language?

When asked what the goal of two years of language study should be, two out of three students in the sample replied "understanding and speaking Spanish 'reasonably well'." Reading and writing came in third after "understanding the role of language in culture and world view" (about 15%). A question on the long range benefits of the study of Spanish yielded highest percentages to practical benefits: travel and possible uses in future jobs (33% and 28%,

respectively). Somewhat fewer thought that the principal long range benefit was in its value as a "broadening" experience. Only 6% cited interest in literature or use in their academic fields as the most important long range benefit of their study of Spanish (this figure corresponds closely to the number of students taking Spanish as a major or minor but does not include all of them.) This again argues for the incorporation of more courses for students not specifically interested in literature or in teaching Spanish. (For those reading this report whose principal interest is literature, I am not arguing for a "down-grading" of the literary content or number of literature courses taught in upper division undergraduate courses. I believe that many students who registered for other types of courses, if offered, would continue into literature and culture classes from these courses. For information on what is being done elsewhere, see Wilga Rivers, "The Non-Major: Tailoring the Course to Fit the Person--not the Image," Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics. (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 85-99.

What kind of courses for lower division?

Seventy-three precent of the sample approved of the establishment of a distinct conversation track at 312 level. Fifty-eight percent approved of adding more sections of accelerated courses at first and second year levels and of encouraging the better students to take these courses. (Incidentally students in accelerated courses are happier overall with the course content and structure of these courses than are the students in the regular courses.) However, most of the students in 604 and 612 are seniors rather than students who are especially experienced in foreign languages, language majors, etc.) The question concerning accelerated courses is complemented by a 53% figure from students voicing approval of slowing down the required courses (regular courses). Apparently what students want is to set up more accelerated courses for the better students and slow down the regular classes for the average and poor students. Almost three out of four students (71%) want all courses to emphasize conversational skills more and 85% want more emphasis on "useful" language (presumably language useful in situations which they see as likely in travel or in jobs--Has any one taught our students how to ask how to get to the bathroom in Spanish, for example?)

How do students evaluate their instructors and the value of their course?

Instructors received a strong vote of approval with four out of five students (83%) in the sample replying yes or definitely yes to the question: "Is your instructor a skilled teacher of Spanish as a foreign language." Only 5% replied no or definitely no. These low ratings may be confined to a few instructors. In comparison to their high school Spanish instructors, UT instructors are rated significantly higher. Fluency of non-native speakers was rated highly as well. Approximately 90% of the students of non-native instructors rated them as (fluent?) definitely yes or yes.

Native and non-native speaker teachers were compared on a number of items ( ). Non-native teachers showed a statistically significant higher rating on the rather nebulous question: "Do you enjoy your present course?" A number of questions dealing with the value of Spanish courses to date (items 13-27) showed that students of native-speaker instructors give significantly higher responses only on the question dealing with the value of Spanish courses in increasing the student's knowledge and understanding of attitudes, beliefs,

etc. of Spanish and Latin American peoples. No statistically significant difference was found on the items pertaining to the value of Spanish courses in learning language skills (understanding, speaking, reading and writing). (A statistically significant difference means that the ratings of the two groups--in this case students of native speakers and students of non-native speakers differ by a great enough margin that the difference is unlikely to have occurred by chance (0.5) level. This does not mean that the difference could not have resulted from chance, but that the odds that it did are less than 5/100.)

Unfortunately the question was phrased in such a way that it is not possible to know if the students were rating only their teacher of Fall, 1973, or of the courses in general. All of these questions (13-27) were phrased: Have your courses in Spanish to date been of value . . . in understanding Spanish, speaking Spanish, etc,? Yet the fact that native-speaker teachers' students gave a higher rating to the value of their courses in teaching informal aspects of Spanish culture (attitudes, beliefs, etc., above) leads one to suspect that students are tending to evaluate their entire experience in Spanish in terms of their present instructor--probably more when they have an instructor whom they consider to be very good than when they have a less successful instructor, I would imagine. However, tentatively, I would suggest that the differences between native and non-native speakers in terms of the acquisition of language skills and the value of Spanish courses to the average undergraduate is not very great. The extra dimension of competence in the informal culture which native speakers bring to the classroom, and which it appears, is highly important in motivating students, can be acquired reasonably well by non-natives by residence abroad. This kind of experience in non-native teachers should be sought in new teaching assistants and encouraged in those who have been unable to live or study abroad.

Skilled teachers vs. not so skilled

In another series of statistical tests, students who considered their instructors skilled (definitely yes, yes) were compared with students who considered their instructors less skilled as teachers of Spanish as a foreign language. Twenty-eight items on the survey were analyzed in this manner, including questions on the value of Spanish courses, teacher characteristics and class structure and questions of a general nature (difficulty/dissatisfaction with course, enjoy course?, etc.) Enjoyment of course, criticism of the intellectual content of the course, and the value of Spanish courses in "rounding out" the students education as well as, interestingly enough, the level of fluency of non-native instructors did not show any statistically significant difference between these two groups (students believe teacher was skilled vs. those who believe teacher was not skilled). Neither did the students perception of the value of Spanish courses in teaching comprehension, speaking, reading and writing Spanish. Yet all of the other items analyzed showed a significant difference. These included: value of courses in increasing the student's knowledge and understanding of formal and informal culture (13, 14) role of language (18), improved grasp of English vocabulary and grammar (19, 20), increasing interest in travel and foreign affairs and an increased interest in continuing the study of Spanish past the requirement. This large number of significant differences also points to the likelihood that students were mainly rating Fall semester's instructor on these items in spite of the wording of the question. However, the lack of a difference in the perceived value of Spanish courses in the student's ability to comprehend, speak, etc. Spanish is puzzling.

Quite possibly when the data are analyzed by comparing instructors who receive overall high ratings as skilled teachers with those who receive overall lower ratings from their class as a whole, some significant differences will be found. This was not done because of complications in the way the data were arranged on the magnetic tape for use in a specific type of compute program. However, during the next several weeks it should be possible to rearrange the data and analyze the student's responses according to classes taught by "skilled instructors" and those not so skilled. The list used to assign ID numbers to instructors has now been destroyed so that all instructors will remain anonymous.

Pending the outcome of this analysis, it is at least interesting to speculate that it is possible that students rate their instructors on teaching skill not strictly according to their teaching methodology but in much broader terms. "Skilled teachers" for example, tend not to isolate the study of Spanish grammar from the use of the language for real communication as much as "less skilled" teachers, (65) (56) Their classes are more varied and rated as more interesting for this reason (68) There is more cultural content in their classes than in the classes of "non-skilled teachers." Teachers perceived as skilled stimulate their students' interest in foreign affairs more (22) and have more success in persuading the student that Spanish may have some relevance to the rest of his academic life--although this isn't easy ("skilled" instructors are rated 3.71 and "unskilled" 4.12 on this item (27).

What factors seem related to the acquisition of language skills?

Comparing students from first year* in groups who felt that their courses had been of definite value in learning to speak Spanish (Group 1) of some positive value (Gr. 2), of medium of neutral value (Gr. 3) and of little or no value (Gr. 4) very clear relationships between cultural content of the course (as well as differences in language teaching methodology) and learning the language emerge. The more value the student sees in his courses in having helped him acquire the ability to speak Spanish, the more likely he is to rate the courses high in value in teaching informal and formal culture (13, 14) and in stimulating his desire to travel abroad (16). The value of courses to give him an understanding of the role of language in the culture (18) and in understanding English grammar (20) are also highly significant (all of these are below the .01 level). The student who believes he has learned how to speak Spanish well for the time he has spent is much more liekly to take more courses beyond the requirement (not surprisingly) than are other students. (78) The teacher's control of the use of language is also important: the more Spanish that is used in the classroom, the more students feel they learn to speak (48) and use of Spanish for real communication rather than just the subject matter of drills and grammatical explanation also shows a highly significant difference between the groups.

The factors related to other language skills (value of courses in to the student in comprehending spoken Spanish, reading and writing) have not yet been analyzed. The success of first year courses in teaching students to speak Spanish was chosen for analysis first because it is an active skill which the student must consciously try to develop and because speaking "reasonably well" (admittedly rather vague) was, along with comprehension of spoken Spanish, the goal of the majority of students taking a minimum of two years of language. It is interesting, and I think, significant, that the students who believe that their courses have been of high value in terms of teaching them to speak Spanish also feel they have

gained more from the courses in terms of cultural and overall sophistication (English vocabulary, grammar and understanding the role of language) than other students and that students who feel their courses were of little value in teaching them to speak Spanish rate their courses lower in value for cultural content.

The type of statistical analysis which was used to determine the differences between these groups (analysis of variance) cannot be used to draw an inference of a cause and effect relationship. However, other types of analysis can be used (such as correlations) which should help to determine whether the successful language student feels he has learned more from his classes no matter what the content, or if the extra-linguistic content of the course stimulates all kinds of students to want to learn a foreign language and, in fact, to learn it better than they would have otherwise.

As mentioned above, it appears that the student's prior interest in learning a foreign language before beginning study at college (28) is related to many of the attitudes tapped by this study and to his intention to continue past the requirement (78). Many students, especially requirement students, begin the study of Spanish with little knowledge of Hispanic culture, either formal or informal. If we look at the situation honestly, I think we would have to admit that human beings are unlikely to work very hard to learn a language spoken by people they neither know or care much about. The integration of interesting cultural content into the teaching of beginning and intermediate level language courses may very well gain in increased interest in the learning of the language more than enough to compensate for the time which is lost which would other wise be devoted to grammar drills. A quote from comments made by one student who completed the questionnaire exemplifies this view:

> After all, why are we learning a foreign language anyway?--Just to meet a college requirement and then forget what we've learned--/not/ to learn the way of thinking, values and culture of another society and be able to deal with it on /its/ own level? And what about culture? Sure, we know /about/ the subjunctive and imperfect tenses--what about the people??? There is a whole world very close to use, just across the border and most Americans are totally ignorant of these close neighbors, their problems and our relationship to South America. Wake up Spanish Department. Get out of this narrow realm of empirical academic /nonsense/ and teach us the language along with the <u>people</u>.

These results are tentative and subject to revision on the basis of further analysis. In addition some of the statements are based on arithmetic calculations <u>hechas a mano</u> which will have to be checked out completely for accuracy. I wish to thank Scott Harris, graduate student in Psychology and systems programmer at the Computation Center for his invaluable help in analyzing the data, all of the instructors and students who cooperated in the administration of this survey, and Profs. Boyer, Solé and Wheelock for their encouragement and assistance in finding funds to help undertake and continue this research.

Jann Randle

P.S. Copies of the original survey (4 page mimeo) are in my mail box for anyone who would like to see a copy to follow item references made in this report. Many of the items on this long form were superfluous, some are vague or poorly worded. The new short form (35 questions) concentrates on the value of the course in progress and the teaching effectiveness of the instructor surveyed and so it should be of more use to the teacher in evaluating his own teaching and to the department in evaluating the effectiveness of specific courses. The short form (purple ditto) is also in my mail box for anyone who wants to see or use it.

Student Questionnaire: Evaluation of Foreign Language Classes

The following questionnaire is designed to help your instructor evaluate his teaching methods and to provide information to the Spanish department on the effectiveness of course content and structure. Please answer each item on the survey as accurately and frankly as possible. If you wish to make any comments on aspects of your course which were not included in this questionnaire, you may do so on the back of the answer sheet.

Use the following code to identify your course, instructor, classification and college and put them in the blanks indicated in the ID section of the answer sheet.

COL. 1-4 course number (406, 407, 408K, 312K, 312L, 315M, 315N, 318, 604, 612)

COL. 5-6 instructor ID number (this will be given to you at the beginning of the survey)

COL. 7 classification: Fresh--1 Soph--2 Jr.--3 Sr.--4 Grad. and other--5

COL. 8 school or college Humanities--1 Soc. Sci.--2 Phys. Sci.--3
Education--4 Other--5

ITEM Number

1. What is your overall grade average?

   A,'--1 B--2 C--3 below C--4

2. Why did you take this course?

   1. Spanish major 2. Spanish minor 3. Elective 4. Requirement

3. Why did you decide to take Spanish instead of some other language? (choose only 1)

   1. Spanish is most useful for my particular college program
   2. I already had some background in Spanish from high school, travel, etc.
   3. My family or friends speak Spanish
   4. There are more opportunities to use Spanish in this area of the country or in my chosen field of employment than other modern foreign languages
   5. The Spanish language (or its literature, history, culture, etc.) seemed most interesting or challenging

4. Did you take <u>at least two years</u> of Spanish in high school?

   1. Yes 2. No

5. Would you have taken <u>any</u> foreign language at college level if it had not been required?

   1. Definitely yes 2. probably 3. don't know 4. probably not 5. definitely not

ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS (6-13) ACCORDING TO THIS SCALE:

1. extremely well 2. rather well 3. neutral, undecided 4. not very well 5. very poorly

How well has this semester's course prepared you to

6. understand spoken Spanish

7. speak Spanish

8. read Spanish

9. write Spanish

To what exten has this semester's course

10. increased your knowledge and understanding of the attitudes, beliefs and patterns of behavior of people in Spain and/or Latin America?

11. increased your knowledge and understanding of the history, literature and artistic achievements of Spain and/or Latin America?

12. increased your knowledge and understanding of Spanish-language groups in the US (Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, etc.)?

13. stimulated your interest in current events in Spanish language countries?

ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS (14 to end) ACCORDING TO THE SCALE BELOW

1. definitely yes 2. yes, somewhat 3. neutral 4. no, somewhat 5. definitely no

14. Are you satisfied with your progress in learning Spanish during this semester's course? (If not, mark the appropriate blank and make specific comments on the back of the answer sheet)

15. Are you satisfied with the type and amount of cultural content of this course? (If not, mark the appropriate blank and make comments on back) (See items 10, 11, 12, and 13 for definition of cultural content)

16. Have your courses in Spanish contributed to your general education in a significant way?

17. At this point, do you think that you will register for any courses beyond the requirement?

18. If not, what is the principal reason? (mark only one)

    1. I am a junior or senior, no time left to take courses beyond the requirement or my program is now filled with other required courses, no room for electives.
    2. my grades in Spanish are not very good

3. there are no courses offered in the Spanish department that interest me
4. I don't like to study foreign languages or literature
5. I want to use my remaining electives to explore other areas of interest

(if none of the above answers are satisfactory, leave blank and indicate your reason for not wishing to continue past the requirement)

19. To what extent is your present class conducted in Spanish?

1. entirely in Spanish 2. mostly in Spanish 3. approximately half Spanish - half English
4. mostly in English, except for drills, dialogue practice, etc.

20. Are you satisfied with the balance of Spanish/English in your present class?

21. If you are not satisfied with the balance, should more Spanish be used?

22. Is your teacher a skilled teacher of Spanish as a foreign language?

23. Does your instructor contribute positively toward motivating the class to learn Spanish?

24. Is he/she a fluent speaker of Spanish? (If your instructor is a native speaker of Spanish, leave this item blank)

25. In what areas does he/she need improvement in teaching techniques? (Please mark only one answer. Leave blank if your instructor needs no improvement in any of the categories below. If you wish to make may specific comments use the back of the answer sheet.)

1. conducting oral drills
2. explanation of grammar
3. leading discussion of readings
4. stimulating students to express themselves extemporaneously
5. organizing and presenting all kinds of materials

26. The pace of this course is too fast.

27. The pace of this course is too slow.

28. Class is dull: there is little variety in presentation of material by the instructor.

29. Class is dull: there is little intellectual content in the course.

30. The textbook is unsatisfactory. (make specific comments if desired)

31. The level of difficulty of language in the readings was too difficult.

32. I was insufficiently prepared by the instructor (or other Spanish courses)

33. The content of the readings was not interesting.

34. Would you have preferred more emphasis on conversation in this course?

35. Would you have preferred more emphasis on grammar or the finer points of style in this course?